



Catalog No. 988

1 Samuel 28:1-25

22nd Message

Brian Morgan

January 8, 1995

THE DEAD-END OF DENIAL

SERIES: KING DAVID IN THE WILDERNESS

One day, a prophet said to the king of Israel, ‘Why did you not obey the voice of the Lord?’ The king replied, ‘I did obey.’ This is a familiar response to a challenge, isn’t it? We call this denial. Denial is a self-defense mechanism whereby we refuse to face reality, admit sin, and take full responsibility for our actions. Denial is as old as the fall of man. We deny that sin exists in our homes, or that we have problems in our personal relationships. Our response to challenge is to turn our backs and attempt to function as if nothing were wrong.

Where does a life of denial eventually lead? The prophet countered the king’s defensive response by saying, ‘Disobedience is as the sin of divination.’ Denial, refusing to acknowledge our sin and take appropriate action, has the effect of splitting the personality and creating a dark underside to life. Though for a time the person in denial may appear to be functioning quite well, denial eventually gains the upper hand and drags him or her into a den of demons.

Denial is a dead-end road. This is what the life of King Saul of Israel teaches us.

Today we come one of the classic scenes in Scripture, Saul’s encounter with the witch at En-dor. *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* has this to say about the text to which we now come in our study of the life of David: ‘With its nocturnal setting, its elements of disguise and recognition, gods ascending out of the earth, Samuel in his mantle, and Saul’s abrupt collapse, the episode forms a vivid and arresting narrative.’ The imagery is so powerful it found its way into Chaucer’s *Friar’s Tale*, Lord Byron’s ‘Saul,’ in *Hebrew Melodies*, Browning’s ‘Mr. Sludge, ‘the Medium,’ Kipling’s powerful ‘En-Dor,’ Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and Robert Frost’s *Masque of Reason*. The image ‘of the witch and the ghost obsessed the young Charles Lamb (‘Witches, and Other Night Fears,’ *Essays of Elia*.)’ ‘Lord Byron called it ‘the finest and most finished witch-scene that ever was written or conceived...It beats all the ghost scenes I ever read!’¹

If we are struggling with denial today, I pray that this text will rouse us out of our refusal to face reality.

Our text, chapter 28 of 1 Samuel, opens on the eve of the Philistine campaign against Israel. In the opening verses the narrator contrasts the demeanors of Saul and David.

I. Contrasting Demeanors on the Eve of Battle (28:1-5)

Now it came about in those days that the Philistines gathered their armed camps for war, to fight against Israel. And Achish said to David, ‘Know assuredly that you will go out with me in the camp, you and your men.’ And David said to Achish, ‘Very well, you shall know what your servant can do.’ So Achish said to David, ‘Very well, I will make you my bodyguard for life.’

Now Samuel was dead, and all Israel had lamented him and buried him in Ramah his own city. And Saul had removed from the

land those who were mediums and spiritists. So the Philistines gathered together and came and camped in Shunem; and Saul gathered all Israel together and they camped in Gilboa. When Saul saw the camp of the Philistines, he was afraid and his heart trembled greatly. (1 Sam 28:1-5 NASB)

Both kings are facing danger, David in the midst of the camp, Saul outside the camp. Yet David is composed, while Saul is terror-stricken. Adding to the tension, the narrator portrays David, Achish’s bodyguard, as seemingly unable to maneuver, because he must operate under the gaze of the Philistine king. Yet, David seems remarkably self-assured and in control. Saul, in stark contrast, is painted in absolute loneliness. Overcome by his fear, the king of Israel is abandoned by all. ‘Samuel is dead, but his power lingers demonically over Saul.’² Saul has further isolated himself by this one act of obedience (which he later disregards) of ‘removing’ (a key word in the chapter; see 28:15-6) all mediums and spiritists from the land. There are no spiritual counselors, either genuine or illegitimate, left to advise Saul.

This is what denial does to us: it isolates us from reality, from family and friends, even from God himself, until at last we are left utterly alone and abandoned to our fears.

Unable to cope with his loneliness, Saul seeks help from the Lord, but to no avail. He must look elsewhere for counsel.

II. Saul’s Encounter with the Witch of En-dor (28:6-14)

When Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by prophets. Then Saul said to his servants, ‘Seek for me a woman who is a medium, that I may go to her and inquire of her.’ And his servants said to him, ‘Behold, there is a woman who is a medium at En-dor.’

Then Saul disguised himself by putting on other clothes, and went, he and two men with him, and they came to the woman by night and he said, ‘Conjure up for me, please, and bring up for me whom I shall name to you.’ But the woman said to him, ‘Behold, you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off those who are mediums and spiritists from the land. Why are you then laying a snare for my life to bring about my death?’ And Saul vowed to her by the LORD, saying, ‘As the LORD lives, there shall no punishment come upon you for this thing.’ Then the woman said, ‘Whom shall I bring up for you?’ And he said, ‘Bring up Samuel for me.’ When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice; and the woman spoke to Saul, saying, ‘Why have you deceived me? For you are Saul.’ And the king said to her, ‘Do not be afraid; but what do you see?’ And the woman said to Saul, ‘I see a divine being coming up out of the earth.’ And he said to her, ‘What is his form?’ And she said, ‘An old man is coming up, and he is wrapped with a robe.’ And Saul knew that it was Samuel, and he bowed with his face to the ground and did homage. (28:6-14)

Here, Saul tries to inquire of the Lord through the normal channels, but God will not speak to him. Just as Samuel “did not see Saul again” (15:34) after the day of his disobedience, Saul is alone and abandoned. “A macabre silence surrounds him on all sides.”³ Silence and abandonment are the results of Saul’s denial.

Yet Saul cannot remain alone in his fear. He is driven to seek consolation by any means possible. Brueggemann says he is

like a person with a diagnosed terminal illness. First that person may try all the clinics and experts; when nothing avails, the fearful one may turn to any possible treatment, any available quack. When approved medicine will not heal, try any faint hope. So Saul, when approved religion will not reassure, goes elsewhere: against the religion of Samuel, against the prohibition in Deuteronomy, against his own royal edict. His decision to seek help from a medium is a measure of his moral exhaustion, his despairing faith, his failed life.⁴

So Saul travels north to En-dor, under the shadow of Mt Tabor, just to the south of the sea of Galilee. “According to Ps. 83:9-10, the town was near the river Kishon and thus a part of the battlefield of the Jezreel Valley; it was the scene of the defeat of Jabin and Sisera by Barak.”⁵ It will be Saul’s encampment site before his battle with the Philistines. After the Arab-Israeli war in 1948, Israel formed a settlement there and called it Ein-dor.

This is a significant place. “En-dor” means, “well of generation.” How interesting. Saul seeks counsel from the wellspring of Israel’s past generation, but he does so through illegitimate means.

Saul arrives by nightfall, in disguise. The circumstances are dark and seedy, utterly inappropriate for the king. But this is precisely the point. Saul, in fact, is no king. He had abandoned his identity years earlier. When he makes his request of the woman, she confronts him with his own royal edict. What he had once prohibited, he now authorizes. Brueggemann calls this “shamed incongruity.”⁶ Adding to his shame, Saul elicits the name of the Lord in a vow, promising the woman that the royal edict (and the Lord’s ethics) will be set aside in her case.

Saul’s vow is the center-line of the text, the point at which the story turns. This vow is the final plunge of his depravity. He has already broken several vows, promises that he made to David, Jonathan, and Michal. How perverse! The only vow Saul keeps is the one he makes to the witch at En-dor! Emboldened by Saul’s vow, the woman consents to work for her unknown guest. But, to her amazement, it is not a spirit or ghost, but Samuel who appears. The seance is shattered, and the identity of the king revealed.

Who is this God, the Lord, who can use even the occasion of a seedy witch’s seance to insert his prophet and speak his word once again? The text underlines the fact that the Lord of Hosts fits no man’s categories. He will reveal himself wherever and whenever he wishes. Brueggemann says, “Even in death, Samuel dominates the narrative. Samuel is and continues to be the most awesome force and figure in Israel since Moses.”⁷

This brings us to Samuel’s last words to the rejected Saul.

III. Last Words from Samuel (28:15-20)

Then Samuel said to Saul, “Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?” And Saul answered, “I am greatly distressed; for the Philistines are waging war against me, and God has departed from me and answers me no more, either through proph-

ets or by dreams; therefore I have called you, that you may make known to me what I should do.” And Samuel said, “Why then do you ask me, since the LORD has departed from you and has become your adversary? And the LORD has done accordingly as He spoke through me; for the LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hand and given it to your neighbor, to David. As you did not obey [*listen to*] the LORD and did not execute His fierce wrath on Amalek, so the LORD has done this thing to you this day. Moreover the LORD will also give over Israel along with you into the hands of the Philistines, therefore tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. Indeed the LORD will give over the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines!”

Then Saul immediately fell full length upon the ground and was very afraid because of the words of Samuel; also there was no strength in him, for he had eaten no food all day and all night. (28:15-20)

Perhaps Saul hoped to hear just one word of comfort from the departed Samuel. Could it be he thought the prophet would be mellowed by death? But death has not mellowed Samuel. He is exactly as Saul remembered him in life: cantankerous, unaccommodating to sin, and uncompromising to God’s word. Samuel will not address any issue until the ultimate cause of disobedience is dealt with. How ironic, to think that in chapter 15, Samuel said to Saul, “Rebellion is as the sin of divination” (15:23). Now, Saul’s disobedience is, in fact, divination. All sin leads to the same place—to demons, witches, and finally, hell itself.

Samuel is surprised that Saul would “ask” him. (The verb “to ask,” *sh’al*, actually is Saul’s name). Reminding Saul of the word of the Lord, the prophet replies, “Why then do you ask me, since the LORD has departed from you and has become your adversary?” The word “LORD,” which is used seven times in a mere six verses, is the key word of the text. The point is, there is no division between God’s prophet and God. If you have disobeyed the word of God, no prophet can console you. This is what Paul said to the Thessalonians concerning their sexual immorality: that he who rejects this is rejecting not my word but the Holy Spirit (1 Thess 4:8). Thus Samuel, from whom Saul sought a word of comfort, can bring but a word of judgment and condemnation. “Samuel’s speech is an awesome performance. It is final and absolute. It allows no appeal, no protest, no argument, no alternative...Saul’s prospects at the hand of Samuel have not changed as much as a syllable since chapter 15. Everything in Saul’s career has, been enacted under the aegis of this irrevocable decision.”⁸ The only new word of revelation is the name of the one who would replace Saul—David—and the date of Saul’s funeral and that of his sons, in Israel, the following day. The narrative has been building to this point, the divine announcement of the new king’s name, by Israel’s first prophet.

On hearing the divine judgment, and the immediacy of his own death at the hands of the Philistines, Saul falls prostrate. He is terrified and morally exhausted. “Twice Byron invokes the ghost of Samuel with the wish that modern monarchs could be as terrified as Saul was.”⁹

The concluding verses describe Saul’s last supper, shared with the witch at En-dor.

IV. Saul’s Last Supper (28:21-25)

And the woman came to Saul and saw that he was terrified, and said to him, “Behold, your maidservant has obeyed [*listened to*]

you, and I have taken my life in my hand, and have listened to your words which you spoke to me. So now also, please listen to the voice of your maidservant, and let me set a piece of bread before you that you may eat and have strength when you go on your way!" But he refused and said, "I will not eat." However, his servants together with the woman urged him, and he listened to them. So he arose from the ground and sat on the bed. And the woman had a fattened calf in the house, and she quickly slaughtered it; and she took flour, kneaded it, and baked unleavened bread from it. And she brought it before Saul and his servants, and they ate. Then they arose and went away that night. (28:21-25)

Following Samuel's speech of condemnation, the prostrate Saul, in fear and terrified exhaustion, cannot even eat. The woman tries to comfort him with the promise of a meal. She pleads with him to "listen" to her as she had "listened" to him. How ironic: listening to the voice of the people over the word of God was what had landed Saul in trouble in the first place (15:24). As might be expected, given Saul's pitiful record, the woman prevails, overruling his weak resolve. The witch prepares his final meal, "fit for a king," and the tragic scene ends with the two having an intimate "fellowship" meal, Saul's last supper, together.

What a depressing, terrible scene! Saul, sinking under the weight of the pronouncement of his own death, being served a meal by a witch, who hoped to comfort him on his last night on earth. Saul eats, keeping his vow to the medium. The meal is eaten, yes, but hardly tasted. Finally, he departs into the darkness of the night.

What can we learn from this sorry tale of disobedience and debauchery? I will draw four conclusions that result from a life of denial.

V. Reflections: Denial's Dead-end

1. We Are Abandoned to Our Fears

When Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him.

The word "inquire" (*sha'al*)¹⁰ has the same Hebrew consonants as Saul's name. It evokes the memory of the birth of Samuel, when the word was first used by Hannah in her request to God for a child (1:17). Like Saul, Hannah was in distress, so much so that she refused to eat at the time of the feast. In her distress she *inquired* of the Lord (1:17) and when the Lord answered her *request*, Hannah used the same verb to *dedicate* Samuel back to the Lord as her gift to him (1:27-28). Ironically, when we hear this verb repeated three times in 1:27-28, we are actually hearing Saul's name (*sha'al, sha'al, sha'al*) echoing in the text. Saul would be the king the people *asked* for, yet because of his disobedience, God would no longer listen to him when he *inquired* of the Lord. At the end of his life, this king, whose very name means "*asked*," would have no access to God.

The point of the story is that it is prayer that determines the course of history. And the elements that open the door to prayer are humility and obedience, not names or titles. If you are shut out from the Lord's presence, do not blame your heritage or your dysfunctional family; it is the result of your own choices.

But, amazingly, God still pursues sinners! Deny him, and still he will pursue you. But Saul responds to God's pursuit of him, not by repentance, but by initiating a seance to conjure up Samuel one

more time, in the vain hope that the crusty old prophet would have good news for him.

2. The Relentless Pursuit of God

"What do you see?"

"I see a divine being coming up out of the earth."

Rabbis and Christian theologians have wrestled over the controversy raised in this chapter concerning the nature of the apparition. Was it really Samuel's spirit which appeared? If it was, how could it have been raised by a witch? Augustine wondered that if it was a demon in disguise, how could it have delivered a true prophecy? This story has given rise to all kinds of speculative questions on the nature of seducing spirits and summoning ghosts.

A careful reading of the text, however, leads us in an entirely different direction. The woman does not summon a ghost; rather, she is brought face to face with Samuel, who in death still speaks. The event surprises her (as it does us), but it demonstrates that God is able to speak through his prophet even in the darkest of all situations—a seedy, grotesque seance. How gracious of God, to faithfully keep reaching out to Saul with his beckoning voice, even in the hall of demons! The Lord of hosts continually invades history to shatter our normal categories of thinking and maintain the faithfulness of his prophetic word.

Many among us can testify to this. I had a friend in the 1960's who was an intern with me at PBC. He had been heavily involved in Eastern mysticism before his conversion. Actually, on the very occasion when he was being initiated into a cult, a dramatic thing happened. As the incense was burning, and he was wearing his robe of initiation and chanting his mantra, God suddenly revealed to him that everything he was doing was demonic. My friend suddenly cried out, "This is all garbage! Jesus is Lord!" Then he turned and walked out. What a merciful God we have. He can use even the darkest situations to reach us.

What a great hope this gives us. Though we run from God, and find ourselves in the darkest of circumstances, he is still faithful to pursue us and speak to us.

There is a scene in the New Testament in which another King is at the very threshold of death. He is not in En-dor, at the foot of Mt Tabor, but rather, standing in glory at the summit of a mountain. There, two prophets, Elijah and Moses, come back from the dead to meet with him and speak of his approaching death. But this scene, unlike the one at En-dor, is one of transcendent glory. Peter, James and John, the three disciples who accompanied Jesus on that occasion, heard the same call for obedience from a heavenly voice, saying, "This is my Son, listen to Him!"

3. The Consistent Prophetic Voice

"Why do you ask me, since the LORD has departed from you?"

There is no division between God's prophet and God's word. God's word holds no comfort for those who disobey him. Unless we obey him we have no relationship with him. Once more Samuel confronts Saul with his earlier disobedience. Saul's seemingly complex problems have but a single cause. Sin was destroying him because he would not destroy it. This is the role of prophetic counseling—facing people with the root causes of their problems, not soothing the pain of their symptoms.

4. The Soul's Ultimate Denial

“Behold, there is woman who is a medium at En-dor.”

In a final act of denial, Saul, hearing the words of reality, does not repent. Rather, to soothe his pain he seeks the fellowship of the world, breaking bread with a witch. This chapter is part of a larger group of “type scenes” concerning the theme of a woman at a well.¹¹ There are seven such scenes in Scripture (incidents involving Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Samson, Ruth, Saul, and Jesus), in which a man leaves his home town and comes to a well in a foreign territory and there meets a woman drawing water from the well. The scene often culminates in a wedding feast. Ironically, Saul is set up for this scene in 9:11, but it is aborted when he asks to see the prophet. The scene is repeated here (En-dor means “the well of generation”). It is almost as if to say that the climactic moment of Saul's depravity, a spiritual union with a medium, is celebrated over a sacrificial meal. And this medium is the only character in the book of 1 Samuel to whom Saul keeps a vow. This, then, is Saul's wedding, in a sense, the spiritual climax of his life. He may have been king of Israel, but in his soul he was cohabiting with demons.

To whom do we really keep our vows? Are we one thing by day and another by night? It is easy for Christians to find themselves bonding with the world in intimate fellowship, when they are barred from God's presence due to their disobedience. When Jesus met a woman at a well, a woman as seedy and as dissolute as this woman at En-dor, he was not defiled by her. On the contrary, in his meeting with her he made her holy. At the wedding feast that followed, the whole city came out to meet Christ—further evidence that the transcendent God whom we serve can turn death into life, mourning into rejoicing.

As we conclude this morning it would be good for us to take a moment of silence and ask ourselves where we find our most intimate fellowship. Is our bonding with the world really a cover for the pain that we feel due of our unresolved disobedience? If that is so, then the words of John, who accompanied Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, are healing balm for our souls. We could not put it more beautifully than the beloved disciple did in these verses,

If we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. (1 John 1:7)

If we are practicing denial today, this is what we need to do. May God grant that we will “walk in the light as He Himself is in the light.” Amen.

© 1995 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino

1. William Kinsley, “Witch of Endor,” in *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 840-841.
2. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 192.
3. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. 2, The Crossing Fates* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), 599.
4. Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 192-193.
5. A. C. Schultz, “Endor,” in *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), vol. 2.
6. Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 193.
7. Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 193.
8. Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 195.
9. Kinsley, “Witch of Endor,” 541.
10. For a complete listing of *sha'al* in 1 Samuel see 1:17, 20, 27, 28; 2:20; 8:10; 10:4, 22; 12:13, 17, 19; 14:37; 17:22, 56; 19:22; 22:10, 13, 15; 23:2, 4; 25:5, 8; 28:6, 16; 30:8, 21.
11. See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 47-63.